

Hither & Thither

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Sense and Reason; Cause and Consequence

By Gary W. Helmer

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), young drivers, between 15 to 20 years old, account for 6.8 percent (12.7 million) of the total drivers in the United States. In 2000, 8,155 15- to 20-year-old drivers were involved in fatal crashes and 3,594 of lost their lives while another 348,000 were injured. The most alarming statistic just might be that this same age group has the highest fatality and injury rates per 100,000 population – an alarming 14 percent!

The Alcohol Factor

Alcohol is a key risk factor for drivers of all ages. In 2000, NHTSA reported that 21 percent of drivers 15 to 20 years old who died in crashes were intoxicated. Additionally, 3 percent of those involved in accidents causing property damage were inebriated.

There is an upside here however. These figures represent a huge decrease from previous years where alcohol and young drivers are concerned. The number of 15- to 20-year-olds involved in fatal crashes decreased 38 percent from 1990 to 2000 – a remarkable trend to say the least.

Many attribute the change in the drinking age laws in most states as the essential factor. All the same, the change did not occur overnight. In fact, during the

Vietnam Era, some states even lowered the age to legally drink!

Real change did not begin until 1984 when Congress passed the Uniform Drinking Age Act. This law formally told the states that if they did not increase the legal age, they would lose portions of their federal highway construction funding. Within a short period, many states began raising the legal age limit for alcohol consumption. Now, all 50 states and the District of Columbia have a 21-year-old minimum drinking age.

Research indicates that the changes in the laws have reduced youth drinking and driving for two reasons: first, the youngsters fear losing their licenses if caught driving while intoxicated, and secondly, the laws reinforce the public's overall disapproval of drinking and driving.

Generally speaking, most of us do not approve of drinking and driving, especially where our children are concerned. All too often, we read or hear about accidents or tragedies involving alcohol. Through our efforts, we can mitigate many of the potential related to this problem. We need to be active however. We need to get involved at all levels – parent, teacher, peer, supervisor, and friend.

Communicate, Educate, and Motivate

There are a number of ways the community can get involved to help ensure that the message gets out.

As adults we need to communicate with our children:

- ◆ Explain the facts about alcohol and what it does to them physically and emotionally.
- ◆ Tell them how it impairs their judgment and decision making abilities.
- ◆ Teach them about alcohol use and abuse.
- ◆ Show them ways to have fun that do not involve alcohol.
- ◆ Support them by being a proper role model.

Ideally, they won't see the need to drink at all.

Next, you will want to explain the legal consequences of drinking and driving:

- ◆ Loss of driving privileges;
- ◆ revocation of licenses;
- ◆ criminal prosecution; and
- ◆ lawsuits

are all real possibilities if caught operating a vehicle or if involved in an accident while under the influence of alcohol.

Give examples wherever possible – bring it close to the audience. Perhaps there is some instance in the community that everyone can describe that will make a difference to them. We all know someone that has been killed or injured by an event related to alcohol consumption either directly or indirectly. Personalize this information for your children - try to get them to understand the reality of the issue. It is a sad day when some young person needlessly loses their life, but it is even worse when it is someone you know.

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Programs to Help

There are a number of programs available to aid parents and educators in this process. Among them are SADD or Students Against Destructive Decisions (formerly known as Students Against Driving Drunk). The first SADD chapter was formed in 1984 and the organization has grown rapidly to well over 16,000 chapters nationwide. Their website is listed below and contains a lot of information about youth and alcohol related problems.

Mother's Against Drunk Drivers (MADD) is a well known organization dedicated to the preservation of our children. This group enjoys lobbying power with the Congress which has had a positive impact on changing the minimum drinking age laws nationwide. MADD will evaluate existing programs and assist in setting up new ones as well.

The NHTSA has several programs available to the public about alcohol and its effects on driving. The NHTSA also gathers statistics and analyzes trends in driving behaviors – an essential element of any educational program. Their website can be found below and offers a considerable amount of information on nearly any transportation issue you may have.

Seek programs that are right for your situation, school, church, activity, club, or wherever young people congregate in the community. Ensure that whatever efforts are made keeps the youth in mind. Some programs will need to be

modified occasionally to reflect updates and changes in the culture.

Schools are letting out for the summer and many young drivers will be taking to the road. Most will drive responsibly, adhering to the traffic laws and not taking any unnecessary risks. There are some however, that will bend the rules and others that will outright ignore them. These are the drivers we need to be aware of but they are also the drivers we need to educate. Never miss the opportunity to explain the pitfalls of alcohol and its effects on driving.

Websites to Cruise

United States Army Safety Center

<http://safety.army.mil>

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

www.nhtsa.dot.gov

Students Against Destructive Decisions

www.saddonline.com/

Emergency Medical Services Authority

www.emsaonline.com/impaired/teenagedrinking.html

Insurance Institute for Highway Safety

www.iihs.org/safety_facts/qanda/underage.htm

Mothers Against Drunk Drivers

www.madd.org

National Organizations for Youth Safety

www.noys.org

Programs to fight Teen Drinking and Driving

www.realsolutions.org/famtalk6.htm

Healthlink: Medical College of Wisconsin

<http://healthlink.mcw.edu/article/901290526.html>

University of Iowa Healthcare

www.uihealthcare.com/topics/alcoholproblems/alco4138.html



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A Parting Thought

"He that knows and knows that he knows, but is unwilling to share what he knows is ungrateful, avoid him." R. Keith Lane

Thanks!